

# Philostratus, the cup of Tantalus and the bowl of Buddha

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## *1. The bowl of Tantalus*

We know of several wondrous objects producing endless food. The cornucopias are famous and they are images of a horn of the goat Amalthea which fed the baby Zeus. Serapis had a basket (*kalathos*) on his head to symbolize that he granted corn for the humans. This god was identified with the biblical Joseph, who stored corn during the period of abundance and distributed it during the years of famine.<sup>1</sup> Another famous multiplication of food was that of loaves and fishes by Jesus: thanks to the miracle, five loaves and two fish were multiplied and fed 5000 people.<sup>2</sup>

Here we will discuss a less famous multiplication and a scarcely known instrument for multiplying, the cup of Tantalus. We will see that this legendary cup was conceived after the model of the bowl of Buddha and testifies to a knowledge of Buddhist beliefs in the first half of the 3rd century AD and to an unexpected transformation of Indian thought within Greek culture.

The only description of this magical cup is that of Philostratus, in his *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* where a discourse of Iarchas, the leader of Indian ascetic men, is reported:

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<sup>1</sup> Mussies (1979). I thank my friends Patricia Johnston, Gaius Stern, and the reviewer of *Ancient Narrative* for their suggestions and criticism.

<sup>2</sup> The Gospels (Marc. 6.30-44; Matth. 14.13-21; Luc. 9.10-17; Joh. 6.1-15) reports the miracle; a similar miracle with seven fish and a few loaves fed 4000 people (Marc. 8.1-9; Matth. 15.32-39). The inscription of 2nd century bishop Abercius (*SEG XXX*, 1479, ll.12-16) says that the Faith fed him during his travel by providing him with fish, bread and wine. Here an allusion to the miracle of the multiplication of loaves and fish is possible.

“at the same time they (scil. Greek poets) deny food and drink to Tantalus, merely because he was a good man and inclined to share with his friends the immortality bestowed upon them by the Gods. And some of them hang stones over him, and rain insults of a terrible kind upon this divine and good man; and I would much rather that they had represented him as swimming in a lake of nectar, for he regaled men with that drink humanely and ungrudgingly.”<sup>3</sup>

The scene takes place in India where the wise Apollonius went and met a group of wise men who lived on top of a hill at the alleged center of the earth. They shared with Apollonius the belief in metempsychosis and both Apollonius and the leader of the wise Indians, Iarchas, declared who they were in their previous lives and also described the past life of a young Indian whose soul had been once that of Palamedes. Iarchas explained to Apollonius that the Greek poets wrongly condemned Tantalus and described his punishment in Tartarus where he stood under a tree and on the shore of a lake but fruits and water were out of his reach. The branches rose aloft when he tried to pick up fruits and water lowered when he stooped to drink and thus he was hungry and thirsty forever.

According to Greek mythology, Tantalus was invited to a dinner with the gods and his first sin was that of taking ambrosia and giving it to men. This was the reason of his punishment. On the other hand, another ancient legend held that Tantalus offered meat of his own son Pelops to the gods during the dinner,<sup>4</sup> and his punishment is described by Homer in the *Odyssey* (XI.582-592), but Pindar, in his first *Olympic* ode (vv. 36-47), corrected this version by asserting that Pelops was taken by Poseidon to Olympus.

In the biography of Apollonius we have a complete inversion of the recurring judgement: instead of a sinner Tantalus became a meritorious, philanthropic man. Philostratus wrote his work in an epoch when some Christians, the so-called Ophites, the Perates, and other sectarians maintained that the snake of the earthly paradise was a benefactor of humans and the creator god was malicious and denied knowledge to the first men. This was another unexpected inversion. The emperor Elagabalus went to Rome and was dressed like a woman. His mother and grandmother sat in the Roman Senate. These examples show that old traditional ideas could be turned upside down, so that Tantalus became a benefactor and lover of humankind instead of a sinner.

Philostratus continues his account by saying:

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<sup>3</sup> Philostr., *Vita Apollonii* 3.25; transl. Conybeare.

<sup>4</sup> Pind., *Ol.* 1.24-28; Hygin., *Fab.* 83, and other sources.

And as he spoke he pointed out a statue which stood upon his left hand, on which was inscribed the name “Tantalus”. Now this statue was four cubits high, and represented a man of fifty years who was clad in the fashion of Argolis, though he differed in his cloak, that being like a Thessalian’s, and he held a cup sufficient at least for one thirsty man<sup>5</sup> and drank to your health there from, and in the goblet was a liquor, an unmixed draught which frothed and foamed, though without bubbling over the edge of the cup.

Now I will presently explain what they consider this cup to be, and for what reason they drink from it. In any case, however, we must suppose that Tantalus was assailed by the poets for not giving rein to his tongue, but because he shared the nectar with mankind; but we must not suppose that he was really the victim of the gods’ dislike, for, had he been hateful to them, he would never have been judged by the Indians to be a good man, for they are most religious people and never transgress any divine command.<sup>6</sup>

Then a king dressed as a Mede went to the meeting and was invited to a meal. And this is what occurred then:

Thereupon four tripods stepped forth like those of the Pythian Temple, but of their own accord, like those which advanced in Homer’s poem [*Iliad* 18.375], and upon them were cup-bearers of black brass resembling the figures of the Greek Ganymede and of Pelops.

Ganymede and Pelops were supposed to have been waiters and cupbearers of the gods.

Then the meal was offered:

And dried fruits and bread and vegetables and the dessert of the season all came in, served in order, and set before them more agreeably that if cooks and waiters had provided it; now two of the tripods flowed with wine, but the other two supplied, the one of them a jet of warm water and the other of cold.<sup>7</sup> Now the precious stones imported from India are employed in Greece for necklaces and rings because they are so small, but among the Indians they are turned into decanters and wine coolers, because they are so large, and into goblets of such size that from a single one of them four persons can slake their thirst at

<sup>5</sup> φιάλην τε προῦπινεν ἀποχρῶσαν ἐνὶ διψῶντι.

<sup>6</sup> Philostr., *Vita Apollonii* 3.25

<sup>7</sup> τῶν δὲ τριπόδων οἱ μὲν δύο οἴνου ἐπέρρεον, τοῖν δυοῖν δὲ ὁ μὲν ὕδατος θερμοῦ κρήνην παρεῖχεν, ὁ δὲ αὖ ψυχροῦ.

midsummer. But the cup-bearers of bronze drew a mixture, he says, of wine and water made in due proportions;<sup>8</sup> and they pushed cups round, just as they do in drinking bouts.

Apollonius, Iarchas, and the king spoke for a while, and eventually Iarchas said:

“let us now proceed to quaff the good cheer provided by Tantalus, and let us sleep...

And forthwith he set an example to this fellow guests, by stooping the first of them all to the goblet which indeed furnished an ample draught for all; for the stream refilled itself plenteously, as if with spring waters welling up from the ground;<sup>9</sup> and Apollonius also drank, for this cup is instituted by the Indians as a cup of friendship; and they feign that Tantalus is the wine-bearer who supplies it, because he is considered to have been the most friendly of men.”<sup>10</sup>

The drinking of Tantalos’ water (but we will see that it was ambrosia) supposedly provided a person with superhuman qualities, as we know thanks to an alleged letter of Apollonius to Iarchas and the other wise Indians:

“I came to you by land, and you gave me passage to the sea. You shared your special wisdom with me and have allowed me to traverse the heavens. I shall tell these things to the Greeks and shall continue to include you in my discussions just as if you were present, unless I drank the water of Tantalus in vain”.<sup>11</sup>

## 2. *The Bowl of Buddha*

In the 19th century some scholars questioned about the faith of Iarchas and his followers, which could have been either Hinduism or Buddhism.<sup>12</sup> “Not a single

<sup>8</sup> τοὺς δὲ οἰνοχόους τοὺς χαλκοῦς ἀρύεσθαι μὲν φησι ζυμῆτρως τοῦ τε οἴνου καὶ τοῦ ὕδατος.

<sup>9</sup> ἅμα ἐξῆρχε τοῖς ξυμπόταις πρῶτος ἐς τὴν φιάλην κύπτων, ἢ δὲ ἐπότηζεν ἱκανῶς πάντα, τὸ γὰρ νᾶμα ἀφθόνως ἐπέδιδου, καθάπερ δὴ τοῖς πηγαίοις ἀναδιδομένοις.

<sup>10</sup> Philostr., *Vita Apollon.* 3.32.

<sup>11</sup> Philostr., *Vita Apollon.* 3.51, transl. Penella (1979: no. 77c, p. 81), but “water” is absent from the Greek text.

<sup>12</sup> See for ex. De Beauvoir Prialux (1860: 102) where the author is favorable to the hypothesis that Iarchas was a brahmin/brahman because of his devotion to the sun. Forms of devotion

Indian god is named” in the description of the encounter<sup>13</sup> and Philostratus, in the same account, always calls the Indian ascetic men “*sophoi*”<sup>14</sup> and only in other passages does he call them brahmans<sup>15</sup> when he forecasts or recalls the encounter. It is possible that Philostratus did not know exactly what a type of ascetics they were and the text (apparently that of Damis, if it truly existed) he had at his disposal<sup>16</sup> did not speak of brahmans. Brahmans were one of the four Indian castes, and Buddha did not recognize the need of keeping the system of castes; one of his aphorisms said that they were like the four major rivers of India which went to the ocean by losing their role.<sup>17</sup> However Philostratus did not think of the Indian caste but of a group of ascetics. Starting from the accounts on Alexander the Great’s visit to the gymnosophists many Greek authors spoke of these ascetics who lived naked in some forests and practiced yoga. In the *Alexander Romance* the naked philosophers are explicitly identified with the brahmans or Oxydorkai/Oxydracae who had nothing to do with the Indian naked philosophers. Plutarch may be the origin of this confusion. He knew of a story concerning the rebellious brahmans of Brahmanabad who also appear in a papyrus dating from about 100 BC and used it in his *Life of Alexander*. Plutarch conflated the brahmans with the gymnosophists and the confusion was recurring in other authors, as well.<sup>18</sup>

Philostratus says that the wise Indians declared their vegetarianism:

“But he will not eat any living creature, for it is wrong to do here.”<sup>19</sup>

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for the sun are also present in Buddhist contexts; cf. for ex. Ferrari (2016). The miracle of levitation performed by the Indians in Philostratus’ account could be ascribed to different religious streams and has been defined as “pan-Indian”: Granoff (1996: 82).

<sup>13</sup> Kemezis (2014: 178).

<sup>14</sup> Philostr., *Vita Apollon.* 3.11, 13-15.

<sup>15</sup> 1.2: “he had interviews with the wizards of Babylon and with the Brahmans of India, and with the nude ascetics of Egypt”, 18: “the Indian race and the sages there, who are called Brahmans and Hyrcanians”; 2.27: “And when they had conversed a good deal about which road to take to the Brahmans”; 3.15 “Apollonius himself describes the character of these sages and of their settlement upon the hill; for in one of his addresses to the Egyptians he says, “I saw Indian Brahmans living upon the earth and yet not on it”; 7 “Here then is something which the Brahmans of India themselves condemned, and which they taught the naked sages of Egypt also to condemn”.

<sup>16</sup> Philostratus asserts that he was using a diary by Damis, but this author could have been fictitious, like bishop Turpino in Ariosto, *Orlando furioso*. See Stoneman (2019: 467), who also recalls that the names of Apollonius, Damis, Iarchas, and king Phraotes appear in a Sanskrit work of uncertain date, the *Āgamaśāstra* by Gaudapāda. This proves at least that Philostratus’ work was known in India some time after its appearance.

<sup>17</sup> *Anguttara Nikāya* 8,19.

<sup>18</sup> On all these problems: Stoneman (2019: 294 and 297).

<sup>19</sup> Philostr., *Vita Apollon.* 3.26.

The tradition of the brahmins previewed the sacrifice, even though arguments were raised against the suffering of animals implied by sacrifices. Buddhist teaching imposed a radical reversal of the ancient Indian tradition and banished the consumption of meat.<sup>20</sup> This detail suggests a Buddhist context rather than a Hindu one even though it is not decisive.

Now we will see that the bowl of Tantalus is a solid proof that Buddhist traditions had been conveyed in the account reported by Philostratus.

Buddha's alms-bowl (sanskrit. *pātra*) was associated with many pious beliefs in different periods and areas.<sup>21</sup>

We start with the account in the *Lalitavistara*. After his enlightenment (*bo-dhi*), Buddha did not eat for 49 days and was eventually visited by two merchants, Trapusa and Bhallika, who offered to him the first meal: honey and rice. Buddha remembered that the former Buddhas received similar food in a bowl. "Then four Great Kings (*lokapālas*) came from the four points of the compass with four golden bowls and offered them to the Tathāgata (i.e. Buddha): "Bhagavān, accept these golden bowls out of friendliness to us." But the Tathāgata, considering that these were not suitable for a *çramana* (i.e. an ascetic), would not accept them. The same with four silver bowls, etc. Then thought the Tathāgata: "In what kind of bowls was it received by the former Tathāgatas, the *arhats*<sup>22</sup> who had attained perfect Wisdom?" "In stone bowls" he remembered.<sup>23</sup> As Buddha needed only one bowl, he accepted the four bowls and piled each of them on top of the other

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<sup>20</sup> Gummer (2014). In chap. 3 of the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* Vimalakīrti argued against traditional sacrifices performed by Sudatta. Both Hindu and Buddhist ascetics practiced vegetarianism: Stoneman (2019: 491).

<sup>21</sup> Stein (1907: 68); Strong (2004).

<sup>22</sup> One who is worthy, one who reached perfection.

<sup>23</sup> Krom (1926: 115). This author presented in comparison the reliefs from the 8th century stūpa of Barabudur in Java and the life of Buddha from *Mahāyāna Sūtras* (whose chronology is uncertain, maybe between the 1st cent. BC to the 2nd AD) and, in particular, the *Lalitavistara Sūtra*. Krom also mentions comparisons with other Buddhist monuments. Images and related texts also in <https://www.photodharma.net/Indonesia/05-Lalitavistara-Krom/Lalitavistara-Storyboard-5-Awakening-and-Teaching.htm>. In the *Buddhacarita* or *Acts of the Buddha*, Part II: Johnston (1936: 216), the account is the following one: "At the time for the alms-round the gods of the four quarters presented the seer with begging-bowls; Gautama, accepting the four, turned them into one for the sake of his dharma. Then at that time two merchants of a passing caravan, being instigated thereto by a friendly deity, joyfully did obeisance to the seer with exalted minds and were the first to give him alms". We recall that Gautama Buddha (or Buddha Sakyamuni) was the famous founder of Buddhism but other humans were supposed to have attained the perfect Buddhahood (enlightenment) and the nirvana, in the past. Often, five such "celestial Buddhas", also known as Tathāgatas, were celebrated, and one, namely Maitreya, was expected to become another Buddha, in the future.

by making them one miraculously. This scene is depicted in many reliefs because it was a popular story.<sup>24</sup>

A brahman told the merchants: “Formerly ye made the vow: “May the Tathāgata when he has attained the Wisdom, after eating of food offered by us, cause the wheel of the Law to revolve”. Now is the vow fulfilled; the Tathāgata hath attained the Wisdom. Offer him food...” After putting together the milk of 1000 cows without leaving anything over and taking from it the finest cream, full of respect, they prepared a dish of food. The bowl made of precious stones that bore the name of the moon and held 100,000 palas,<sup>25</sup> was filled up to the brim with food, after being cleaned, purified and made spotless...<sup>26</sup>

This bowl had a divine origin and Buddha, according to some accounts, was to use it throughout the rest of his life.<sup>27</sup> Different versions spoke of either one bowl or four and the material they were made of varies, as well.<sup>28</sup> According to certain authors, four divine beings (the *lokapālas*) wanted to offer to Buddha four bowls made of beryl, gold and other precious materials, but Buddha preferred something more simple and received bowls made with a blue-green stone.<sup>29</sup> A Chinese author of the 5th century AD wrote that all the Buddhas who had already appeared and were to appear in the future in this world used the same bowl.<sup>30</sup> This object was credited with many miracles performed by Buddha.<sup>31</sup> The Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Faxian went to Peshawar (Fou Lou Sha in Chinese) in the 5th century AD and visited the local monastery where about 700 monks lived and described their ceremonies at noon and dusk, when they took the sacred bowl in a procession and its weight changed according to the moral level of each bearer. If a poor man put a flower into the bowl it filled with flowers by himself, but a rich man was unable to fill it with coins even if he put a number of them inside. It consisted of four bowls joined together whose upper rims were visible.<sup>32</sup>

Another legend has that a monkey stole the alms-bowl at Vaisali, climbed a tree and filled the bowl with honey (or palm tree sap) and presented it to Buddha

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<sup>24</sup> See Ghani-ur-Rahman (2010).

<sup>25</sup> *Pala* corresponds to about 50 grams.

<sup>26</sup> Krom, 117.

<sup>27</sup> Lamotte (1965: 1676 and 1679).

<sup>28</sup> See Wang-Toutain (1994: 61).

<sup>29</sup> Wang-Toutain (1994: 60).

<sup>30</sup> Legge (1886: 110); Wang-Toutain (1994: 62).

<sup>31</sup> Wang-Toutain (1994:62).

<sup>32</sup> Wang-Toutain (1994: 63-64); on Buddhist bowls in monasteries: Mather (1981).

as a gift. Buddha accepted it and the monkey jumped in a great excitement and so fell down and died but was reborn as a human and eventually enlightened.<sup>33</sup>

After the nirvana of Buddha, his bowl became a source of boons for humankind. According to the *Fo mieduhou guanlian zangsong jing*, i.e. the “*Sūtra* on the Buddha’s deposition into the sarcophagus and his burial after nirvana” (4th century), Buddha forecast a period of injustice which will cease thanks to the bowl. This latter was to become rays with five colors flying aloft and then the people will recover his wisdom and well-being.<sup>34</sup>

According to another tradition, recurring in the Medieval Pāli poem *Jinacaritam* [“The Life of the victorious (Buddha)”],<sup>35</sup> and in other texts and images, a young woman called Sujātā offered the bowl to Buddha before he reached the tree of his *bodhi* (enlightenment) (fig. 1):

A beautiful lady named Sujātā (Well-Born), wishing for success, took a golden bowl with milk-rice on her head, and bowing (thinking):

“I will straight away give an offering to the excellent Tree-*Deva* who has taken residence in this place”, after going and seeing the Supreme Man, with the thought: “This is a *Deva!*”, with heart uplifted, after giving the bowl of rice to the Excellent One, (said): “Sire! In the same way as my hopes have been successful, may yours also succeed.” Having spoken this word, the noble lady left that place. Then that Noble Sage, after taking the bowl of rice, going to the bank of the (river) Nerañjarā, and eating that excellent food, cast her delightful bowl against the stream.

A similar tradition<sup>36</sup> adds more detail:

<sup>33</sup> See Bénisti (1981-82); Kumar (1994: part. 260); Brown (2009), with references to sources and iconographies; see especially *Jatāka Stories or Stories of the Buddha's former Births*, transl. from the Pāli by various hands under the editorship of Cowell (1895-1913).

<sup>34</sup> Wang-Toutain (1994: 67; cf. other traditions at 69-78); on iconographies see Williams (1975: 178-179). Many legends of a similar magic bowl are reported in a (perhaps) 6th century epic Tamil Buddhist poem, the *Manimekhalai*, describing the adventures of a woman, the Buddhist dancer and nun Manimekhalai. In the cantos XI, XIII-XV a bowl called Amrita Surabhi, i.e. “cow of abundance”, appears in the day of the birth of Buddha, it is always filled with food, and its origin is narrated. See, for ex. Daniélou (2008).

<sup>35</sup> Available online: <https://www.ancient-buddhist-texts.net/Buddhist-Texts/X3-Jinacaritam/Jinacaritam.pdf>. On Sujata: <https://www.ancient-buddhist-texts.net/Texts-and-Translations/Jinacaritam-Victorious-Buddha/17-Sujata.htm>.

<sup>36</sup> Herold (1927: 85).





Fig. 1. Burmese ivory carving depicting Sujata offering a bowl to Buddha. From Brunk auction 2 August 2020. <https://brunkauctions.com/lot/rare-burmese-ivory-carving-life-of-the-buddha-3990973>

He (Buddha) rose and set out for the village of Uruvilva, to beg. Sujātā had just finished milking eight wonderful cows that she owned. The milk they gave was rich, oily and of a delicate savor. She added honey and rice flour to it, then set the mixture to boil in a new pot, on a new stove. Huge bubbles began to form and kept floating off to the right, without the liquid rising or

spilling a single drop. The stove did not even smoke. Sujātā was astonished... She poured the milk mixed with honey and flour into a golden bowl, and she awaited the hero.

He entered. The house was lighted up by his presence. Sujātā, to do him honor, bowed seven times. He sat down. Sujātā kneeled and bathed his feet in sweet-scented water; then she offered him the golden bowl full of milk mixed with rice flour and honey.

Another legend holds that Buddha took a bath in a river and, when he stepped out of the water “looked around along the bank desirous to be seated. Then appeared the nāga-maiden of the river Nairāṅjanā from out of the earth and offered the Bodhisattva<sup>37</sup> a stately seat made of precious stones”.<sup>38</sup> Buddha sat and ate from the bowl; “when he had finished eating he threw that golden food-bowl in the water without looking at it. And when it was thrown away, Sāgara, the nāga king, respectfully carrying out his thought, took it up” This serpent-king took the bowl to heaven thanks to the bird-like divine creature Garuḍa.

In the stories of the merchants and of Sujātā, the bowls contained an enormous amount of milk (from 1000 cows!) and the monk Faxian said that a rich person was unable to fill the bowl with coins even if he put a number of them inside. One could never fill the bowl and make it overflow. However, a single flower placed inside the bowl multiplied its content, and the bowl filled itself automatically with flowers. All these were miracles and the issue of food or liquids from this bowl was miraculous, as well. The bowl was a multiplier or a divisor and these phenomena also depended on the moral value of the user.

### 3. *The Vimalakīrti Sūtra*

We have at our disposal a specific text, the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* (“Collection of aphorisms of Vimalakīrti”), also known as *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa* (“Instructions of Vimalakīrti”), a work difficult to date, and possibly dating to about 100 AD,<sup>39</sup> which reports a series of Buddhist teachings especially aiming at removing dualism and culminating in the doctrine of silence (which is in accord with Pythagoreanism and the philosophical training of Apollonius of Tyana). The *Vimalakīrti*

<sup>37</sup> A Bodhisattva is a person who is about to become a Buddha, i.e. to receive the final and complete enlightenment, a person who wants to receive the *bodhi* (enlightenment, awakening) or was predicted to receive it.

<sup>38</sup> Krom (1926: 94-95); Poppe (1967: 144).

<sup>39</sup> Watson (1999: 1-2).

*Sūtra* is known from Sanskrit, Tibetan, and Chinese versions.<sup>40</sup> I have used the English translation from Tibetan by Robert Thurman<sup>41</sup> and also checked Thomas Cleary's translation (2013)<sup>42</sup> from the Sanskrit text discovered in the Potala Palace in Lhasa, in 1999. The differences between them are not substantial.

Vimalakīrti was a distinguished and extremely wise layman from the tribe of the Licchavi; he was enlightened according to the Mahayana Buddhist doctrine, was praised by all Buddhas, and lived in Vaisali. He hosted in his house many wise and pious men and promoted discussions and teachings in the Buddhist style.

This text shares many features with the *Life of Apollonius* and, in particular, numerous aspects of the description of Vimalakīrti's meal dovetail with the dinner of Apollonius with the wise Indians. The Indian text also helps understand some details of Philostratus' account. I will present the most important shared elements in the following scheme, and subsequently we will discuss them.

*Life of Apollonius*

*Vimalakīrti Sūtra (translations from Sanskrit are in footnotes)*

#### POLYGLOTTISM

III.16 "when he saw Apollonius, Iarchas greeted him in the Greek tongue.

1 Their (*the assembly presided by Vimalakīrti*) voices were perfect in diction and resonance, and versatile in speaking all languages.<sup>43</sup>

#### OMNISCIENCE

III.16 *Iarchas knew everything about Apollonius even before his arrival.* Iarchas... asked for the Indian's letter. And as Apollonius showed astonishment at his gift of prescience, he took pains to add that a single letter was missing in the epistle, namely a delta, which had escaped the writer; and this was found to be the case.

*Many passages speak of omniscience; see for ex. the following ones*

1 They were expert in knowing the spiritual faculties of all living beings... The Buddha, knowing telepathically the thought of venerable Sariputra...<sup>44</sup> They were endowed with the wisdom that is able to understand the thoughts

<sup>40</sup> Study Group on Buddhist Sanskrit Literature, 2006; Fischer, Yokota (2008); Lamotte (1962).

<sup>41</sup> Thurman (1976).

<sup>42</sup> Cleary (2013).

<sup>43</sup> 1 Who could pronounce the languages of all people perfectly... When one word of the Blessed One is circulated abroad, it is understood by groups in different languages.

<sup>44</sup> 1 Now the Blessed One, perceiving what venerable Sariputra was thinking, said to him...

III.18 Iarchas...said: “Ask whatever you like, for you find yourself among people who know everything. of living beings, as well as their comings and goings.<sup>45</sup>

#### MIRACULOUS CANOPY

III.14 though they seem to live in the open air, yet they raise up a shadow and veil themselves in it, so that they are not made wet when it rains and they enjoy the sunlight whenever they choose. 1 As soon as all these precious parasols had been laid down, suddenly, by the miraculous power of the Lord, they were transformed into a single precious canopy so great that it formed a covering for this entire billion-world galaxy.<sup>46</sup>

#### JEWELS

III.27 the precious stones imported from India are employed in Greece for necklaces and rings because they are so small, but among the Indians they are turned into decanters and wine coolers. 1 Furthermore, reverend Sariputra, in this house there are always four inexhaustible treasures, replete with all kinds of jewels, which never decrease, although all the poor and wretched may partake to their satisfaction.<sup>47</sup>

#### THRONES

III.16 Iarchas sat down on a high stool—and this was of black copper and chased with golden figures, while the seats of the others were of copper, but plain and not so high, for they sat lower down than Iarchas. *Many passages speak of thrones; see for ex. the following ones.*

III.17 Iarchas said to the stripling: “Bring out the throne of Phraotes for the wise Apollonius. 6 These thrones were so tall, spacious, and beautiful that the bodhisattvas, great disciples, Sakras, Brahmas, Lokapalas, and other gods had never before seen the like. The thrones descended from the sky and came to rest in the house of the Licchavi Vimalakīrti.

<sup>45</sup> 1 Recognized for higher knowledge... Skilled in the knowledge of the faculties of all beings... Devoted to the sphere of knowledge entering into the comings and goings of all people and people’s ways of thinking.

<sup>46</sup> 1 Those precious parasols that had been presented immediately became one by the power of Buddha, and the whole billion world universe appeared to be covered by that parasol.

<sup>47</sup> 1 This universe became a collection of many jewels... This universe was like the universe Endless Array of Gems of Virtue, of the Realized One named Array of Jewels.

III.27 Apollonius was about to rise and retire, when Iarchas checked him from leaving his throne.

9 Vimalakīrti created ninety million lion-thrones exactly like those already there, and the bodhisattvas were seated...

bodhisattvas seated on the high, wide, and beautiful lion-thrones.<sup>48</sup>

#### METEMPSYCHOSIS

For ex. III.19 Apollonius said: "And what view do you take of the soul?"

"That," replied the other, "which Pythagoras imparted to you, and which we imparted to the Egyptians."

"Would you then say," said Apollonius, "that as Pythagoras declared himself to be Euphorbus, so you yourself, before you entered your present body, were one of the Trojans or Achaeans or someone else?..."

III.22 (Iarchas about a young Indian:):  
The truth is this stripling was once Palamedes of Troy.

*Many passages speak of metempsychosis; see for ex. the following ones..*

1 They (bodhisattvas followers of Vimalakīrti) had crossed the terrifying abyss of the bad migrations, and yet they assumed reincarnation voluntarily in all migrations for the sake of disciplining living beings.<sup>49</sup>

#### A KING ATTENDS THE MEETING OF THE WISE MEN

III.23 the King will come early in the afternoon to consult you about his own business.

III.26-27 a king went, inferior to the wise Phraotes, and was invited to dinner.

5 the Buddha said to the crown prince, Manjusri, "Manjusri, go to the Licchavi Vimalakīrti to inquire about his illness..." Surely the conversations of the young prince Manjusri and that good man will result in a profound teaching of the Dharma.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>48</sup> 5 the Licchavi Vimalakīrti said to Manjusri the perpetual youth, "Manjusri... did you see the very best lion seats?" Manjusri said, "... That Blessed One's seat is sixty-eight hundred thousand leagues in size..." ... the Licchavi Vimalakīrti performed such an exercise of mystic power that thirty-two thousand lion seats ... were sent... (The dimension of the seats was proportioned to the dimension following the inconceivable liberation).

<sup>49</sup> 3 "Maitreya, if it has been predicted by the Blessed One that you are bound to attain supreme true complete enlightenment in one birth, in reference to what birth is it predicted?"

<sup>50</sup> 4 Then the Blessed One said to Manjusri the perpetual youth, "Manjusri, go to the Licchavi Vimalakīrti to ask after his illness".

## DO NOT DESPISE INFERIOR PEOPLE

III.30 (*the brother and the son of the king should learn respect*) “Because,” said Iarchas, “they reckon to be kings one day themselves, and by being made themselves to suffer disdain they must be taught not to disdain others.”

## A DINNER WITH THE GODS

III.27 four tripods stepped forth like those of the Pythian Temple, but of their own accord, like those which advanced in Homer’s poem, and upon them were cup-bearers of black brass resembling the figures of Ganymede and of Pelops among the Greeks... two of the tripods flowed with wine, but the other two supplied, the one of them a jet of warm water and the other of cold... “the cup-bearers of bronze drew a mixture, he says, of wine and water made in due proportions; and they pushed cups round, just as they do in drinking bouts.

III.32 (Iarchas said:) “let us now proceed to quaff the good cheer provided by Tantalus...”

And forthwith he set an example to this fellow guests, by stooping the first of them all to the goblet which indeed furnished an ample draught for all; for the stream refilled itself plenteously, as if with spring waters welling up from the ground; and Apollonius also drank, for this cup is instituted by the Indians as a cup of friendship; and they feign

10 Manjusri replied, “Noble sir, did not the Tathagata declare, ‘Those who are unlearned should not be despised’?”<sup>51</sup>

1 The Buddha said, “... the gods of the Trayastrimsa heaven all take their food from a single precious vessel, yet the nectar which nourishes each one differs according to the differences of the merits each has accumulated...”

*In chapter 10 the Vimalakīrti Sūtra describes the meal offered to the wise and saint people.*

Vimalakīrti, knowing telepathically the thought of the venerable Sariputra, spoke to him: “...Just wait a minute, reverend Sariputra, and you will eat such food as you have never before tasted”

... the Licchavi Vimalakīrti set himself in such a concentration and performed such a miraculous feat that those bodhisattvas and those great disciples were enabled to see the universe called Sarvagandhasugandha, which is located in the direction of the zenith... There the Tathagata named Sugandhakuta resides... At this time, the Tathagata Sugandhakuta sat down with his bodhisattvas to take his meal, and the deities called

<sup>51</sup> 9 (Manjusri to Vimalakīrti:) “Sir, has it not been said by the Realized One that one should not disdain the unlearned?”

that Tantalus is the wine-bearer who supplies it, because he is considered to have been the most friendly of men.

Gandhavyuhahara, who were all devoted to the Mahayana, served and attended upon the Buddha and his bodhisattvas. Everyone in the gathering at the house of Vimalakīrti was able to see distinctly this universe wherein the Tathagata Sugandhakuta and his bodhisattvas were taking their meal.

The Licchavi Vimalakīrti addressed the whole gathering of bodhisattvas:

“Good sirs, is there any among you who would like to go to that buddha-field to bring back some food?” ...

Then, the Licchavi Vimalakīrti, without rising from his couch, magically emanated an incarnation-bodhisattva, whose body was of golden color, adorned with the auspicious signs and marks, and of such an appearance that he outshone the whole assembly. The Licchavi Vimalakīrti addressed that incarnated bodhisattva: “Noble son, go in the direction of the zenith... you will reach a universe called Sarvagandhasugandha, where you will find the Tathagata Sugandhakuta taking his meal. Go to him and, having bowed down at his feet... Having thus asked after his health, you should request of him 'Vimalakīrti asks the Lord to give me the remains of your meal, with which he will accomplish the buddhawork in the universe called Saha. Thus, those living beings with inferior aspirations will be inspired with lofty aspirations, and the good name of the Tathagata will be celebrated far and wide'.”

*The Bodhisattva went to the universe of Sugandhakuta.*

Then, the Tathagata Sugandhakuta poured some of his food, impregnated with all perfumes, into a fragrant vessel and gave it to the incarnation-bodhisattva.

*Some adeptes of Sugandhakuta descended to the world of Vimalakīrti but in disguise.*

Then the incarnation-bodhisattva took the food and departed with the ninety million bodhisattvas and by the power of the Buddha and the supernatural operation of Vimalakīrti, disappeared from that universe

Sarvagandhasugandha and stood again in the house of Vimalakīrti in a fraction of a second. The Licchavi Vimalakīrti created ninety million lion-thrones exactly like those already there, and the bodhisattvas were seated....

The incarnation-bodhisattva gave the vessel full of food to Vimalakīrti, and the fragrance of that food permeated the entire great city of Vaisali...

The Licchavi Vimalakīrti spoke to the elder Sariputra and the great disciples: "Reverends, eat of the food of the Tathagata! It is ambrosia perfumed by the great compassion... But some of the disciples had already had the thought: "How can such a huge multitude eat such a small amount of food?" Then the incarnation-bodhisattva said to those disciples, "...the four great oceans might dry up, but this food would never be



exhausted. If all living beings were to eat for an aeon an amount of this food equal to Mount Sumeru in size, it would not be depleted. Why? Issued from inexhaustible morality, concentration, and wisdom, the remains of the food of the Tathagata contained in this vessel cannot be exhausted.” Indeed, the entire gathering was satisfied by that food, and the food was not at all depleted.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> 9 the Licchavi Vimalakīrti went into such a state of concentration and executed such a performance of mystic power as to make visible to those bodhisattvas and senior disciples a Buddha-field in the zenith past as many worlds as grains of sand in forty-two Ganges Rivers...

(the world of Sagandhakuta:) the food those bodhisattvas were provided with pervaded countless worlds with fragrance.

...

Now Vimalakīrti, without getting up from his bed, projected the body of an emanated bodhisattva in the presence of those bodhisattvas, a golden image fully adorned with the marks and refinements of Buddhas, with an appearance that overshadowed everyone there. Then Vimalakīrti said to the projected bodhisattva, “Go upward ... to a world called Fragrant with All Scents; there a Realized One named Sugandhakuta has now sat down to eat. Go to him, pay respects, and inform him of this: “The Licchavi Vimalakīrti pays utmost respects to the Blessed One and is solicitous of the Blessed One, that he has little discomfort and little disquiet, gets about easily, is strong of limb, comfortable, without complaint, feeling good, and has no illness. Blessed One, please give me the leftovers of the food; Vimalakīrti is going to do Buddha-work with it in the world Endurance, by which people of low faith will engender higher faith, and the characteristics of the Realized will develop.”

(A discussion follows between Sugandhakuta and his bodhisattvas).

Now the Blessed Realized One Sugandhakuta tossed some food, scented with all fragrances, onto a plate imbued with all fragrances, then gave it to the projected bodhisattva. (The bodhisattvas of Sugandhakuta want to go to the Buddha field of Sakyamuni and Vimalakīrti).

Now the projected bodhisattva, accepting that food scented with all fragrances, together with ninety hundred thousand bodhisattvas, by the power of the Buddha and Vimalakīrti’s support, instantly disappeared from the world Sarvagandhasugandha and sat down in the house of Vimalakīrti the Licchavi. Vimalakīrti magically produced ninety hundred thousand lion-seats like the previous ones, and those bodhisattvas sat in them. ...

Now the Licchavi Vimalakīrti said to the elder Sariputra and the senior disciples, “Honorable ones, eat the food of the Realized, ambrosia scented with great compassion; don’t show any narrow-mindedness, or you won’t be able to enjoy the gift.”

Then some disciples thought, “How can a tiny bit of food feed such a crowd?”

This fantastic flight<sup>53</sup> through the heavens towards a superior universe where another great Buddha lived probably explains the words of Apollonius in his letter to Iarchas and the other wise Indians:

“You shared your special wisdom with me and have allowed me to traverse the heavens. All this I shall mention to the Hellenes; and I shall communicate my words to you as if you were present, unless I have in vain drunk the draught of Tantalus.”<sup>54</sup>

In the biography by Philostratus, the task of Tantalus is similar to that of the golden bodhisattva who flew to the heaven of a divine Buddha and fetched some food for the assembly in Vaisali. According to Philostratus “cup-bearers of bronze drew a mixture of wine and water” and, according to the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*, the body of the bodhisattva was of golden color.

The comparison with the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* confirms that the drink from the cup of Tantalus was ambrosia, the drink of gods, conferring wisdom upon the drinker. The divine liquid was called *amṛta* in sanskrit, i.e. “immortality”, which corresponds etymologically to ambrosia. In the *Rig Veda* it is identified with *soma*, the drink of the gods. It was kept in a metal bottle called *kalaśa*, depicted on several Buddhist statues and kept by Buddhist monks for their ceremonies. In the *Questions of Milinda* the ambrosia given to men is compared with Buddhist doctrine spread to everyone:

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Then the projected bodhisattva said to those disciples, “Honorable sirs, do not compare the wisdom and virtue of the Realized to your wisdom and virtue. Why? Even if the four oceans could dry up, there would be no exhausting this food. In the same way, even if all beings ate mountainous portions of the food, it would not be exhausted. Why? The remainder of the Realized One’s food left on the plate, made of inexhaustible integrity, wisdom, and concentration, can never be exhausted.”

So now the whole crowd had their fill of the food, and yet the food did not run out. The bodhisattvas, disciples, gods, world guardians, and other people who ate the food were filled with bliss...

<sup>53</sup> Photius (*Bibliotheca*, codex 44.10a) condemned the Indian account as ridiculous and implausible because he did not know that it was inspired by imaginative Indian traditions. Modern scholars often shared the point of view of the patriarch and ascribed the wondrous episodes to the literary stream of the Greek “Indian” tales; see Meyer (1917: 376); Gyse-linck, Demoen (2009: 111-114).

<sup>54</sup> Philostr., *Vita Apollonii* III.51.

Suppose, O king, a man were to give ambrosia to all the people, and they, eating of it, were to become healthy and long-lived and free from every bodily ill...<sup>55</sup>

Here we recognize a good reason for reinterpreting Tantalus in a Buddhist vein. The idea of sharing the ambrosia with humans recurred in Buddhism and someone noticed that this deed had been performed by Tantalus who was integrated into the Buddhist tradition.

#### 4. *Tantalus and Buddha*

It is quite evident that the legendary dialogue of Apollonius with the Indian ascetics conveys Buddhist traditions.

- The location in India fits for a meeting with Buddhist ascetics in the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd centuries AD;
- The four bowls of precious stone containing drinks and food dovetail the four stone bowls of Buddha.
- Abundant food, wine and water offered to the guests by the ascetics are somehow unexpected and could depend on the wondrous nature of the bowls;
- The magic bowl which Apollonius drank from was a symbol of friendship and the merchants offered the bowl to Buddha by seeking his friendliness. Philanthropy and friendship were recurring concepts in both cases.
- In the letter of Apollonius to Iarchas the philosopher said: δεδώκατε καὶ διὰ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ πορεύεσθαι (you have allowed me to traverse the heavens), and this recalls the transformation of the bowl into colored rays going aloft to the sky, as in the “*Sūtra* on the Buddha’s deposition”. The bowl itself was offered to Buddha by four heavenly divine beings. The golden bodhisattva fetched the food from a divine heaven. The idea of providing humans with ambrosia was shared by Buddhism and the myth of Tantalus.

The legendary bowl producing drink or food automatically is presented twice in the *Life of Apollonius*: the divine tripods carried four containers which were issuing food and drink miraculously, and the cup of Tantalus producing ambrosia automatically. Philostratus and/or his source only knew of the Homeric tripods of the Olympian gods, but no Greek myth spoke of bowls or cups issuing drink and food automatically. Therefore it is probable that this feature had an Indian, Buddhist origin because it was known everywhere in the Buddhist world with some

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<sup>55</sup> *The Questions of King Milinda*, question 20; Rhys Davids (1890, 236).

local variations. Moreover, the four stone bowls had a precise meaning in the legend of the *lokapālas*, the gods of the four cardinal points, but in a Greek context their number had no meaning. The starting points which triggered comparisons between Buddhism and Greek culture were two: the symposia of Homeric gods and Tantalus providing the humans with ambrosia.

Philostratus wanted to compare Greek venerable stories such as that of the tripods of Hephaestus which carried automatically food for the Olympian gods and the tripods of Indian sages which similarly carried food without any effort. As in the *Heroikos* a Phoenician was eventually convinced of the relevance of the hero Protesilaus, here, in far-off India, the Greek traditions, introduced following the Macedonian conquest, were always present and relevant. Surprisingly, Philostratus tells us that the wise ascetics were able to understand them better than the Greeks themselves. It is highly improbable that some Indians venerated Tantalus instead of Buddha, whose image appears on coins of Kushana kings. Tantalus became a character of some Buddhist legends and Philostratus wanted to show that Tantalus was known to Homer and to Indians who gave a correct judgement of his behaviour.

There were reasons why Buddhism influenced the myth of Tantalus and possibly identified him with a bodhisattva. Tantalus was depicted staying or sitting under a tree without eating the fruits, and in front of a lake whose water lowered and did not allow him to drink. Buddha, as well, was sitting under a tree, the bodhi-tree, without eating and drinking until he was enlightened and for another 49 days after that. Tantalus shared the ambrosia with the gods and gave it to the humans along with the secrets of the gods; Buddha obtained the divine wisdom and shared it with the humans by teaching the Law, and both suffered in order to help humankind.

The statue of Tantalus described by Philostratus<sup>56</sup> could have been that of Buddha or of a bodhisattva, perhaps the Buddha master of medicine (Bhaisajyaguru, described in the Sanskrit *Bhaisajyaguru-sutra*) who is always holding a bowl<sup>57</sup> in his depictions (fig. 2), or Buddha receiving the bowl from the monkey.<sup>58</sup>

### 5. Mutual influences between India and the Roman Empire

Apollonius' interview to Buddhist devotees is by no means absurd because it recalls the interview of the 2nd century BC Greek king Menander to the Buddhist

<sup>56</sup> Philostr., *Vita Apollonii* 3.25, quoted above, p. 21.

<sup>57</sup> On this bowl: Okuda, Noro, Ito (1999).

<sup>58</sup> Brown (2009).

monk Nāgasena according to the *Questions of Milinda*, from the Pāli canon of Buddhism, i.e. its ancient Sanskrit texts.

In the Roman Empire multifaceted discussions and theories were put forwards about the variety of gods and coexisting religious systems. Thanks to the *constitutio Antoniniana* horizons were broadened and the Graeco-Roman religion became one among many different religions. It suffices to recall the Helagabalium



Fig. 2. Gilt-bronze statue of Medicine Buddha, 17th-18th cent. From Christie's auction 14 May 2019. <https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-6200247>

of the emperor Elagabalus in Rome, which was aimed at including all the symbols, sacred objects, and texts of every religion and cult.<sup>59</sup> On the other hand, the *Historia Augusta* reports that Severus Alexander venerated Christ, Abraham, and Orpheus in his *lararium*.<sup>60</sup>

One may wonder at the unexpected identification of Tantalus with a Buddhist hero, but one should not forget the existing, numerous Greek cities and communities in India and Bactria, whose culture gave a new interpretation to their Greek traditions in order to fit Indian beliefs, especially Buddhism. The kings of the Kushana dynasty (when Philostratus wrote his works Vasudeva was the king, ca. 190-230 AD) struck golden coins depicting Indian gods such as Oesho (i.e. the Avestan Vayu conflated with Shiva), Buddo (i.e. Buddha), Metrago (i.e. Maitreya), Iranian gods such as Mithro (i.e. Mithras), Ooromozdo (i.e. Ahura Mazda), Nanaia, and Greek gods such as Herakles, Helios, Selene, Anemos, Oanindo represented as Nike, and Serapis.<sup>61</sup>

During the period of the Kushana dynasty, the art of Gandhara proves that Heracles was integrated into the Buddhist religious system. His iconography, with the lion's pelt and the club, was used to depict Vajrapāṇi, "the bearer of *vajra*", i.e. a symbolic thunderbolt. This Buddhist Heracles recurs in the scene of the "Great Departure", when Buddha Śākyamuni begun his wandering and ascetic life, and is also present in the scene of the donation of the four bowls by the Guardians of the World.<sup>62</sup> Vajrapāṇi was a warrior and protected Buddha but was also enforcing and spreading the Buddhist doctrine.

The philanthropic deeds of Heracles and his final death and deification were important reasons for this identification. The protection of humans was probably the reason why Laocoon was also praised by the Indo-Greeks and thus the scene of the Trojan Horse recurs in the Gandhara art.<sup>63</sup> The Trojan myths were popular among the Buddhists of Gandhara, and this explains the recurring topic of the discourses between Apollonius and Iarchas which revolved around Homeric themes. Gandharan art also shows Philoctetes, a suffering hero, whose coming to Troy was fatal for this city.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Hist.Aug., *Heliog.* 3.

<sup>60</sup> Hist.Aug., *Alex. Sev.* 29.

<sup>61</sup> See Jongeward, Cribb, Donovan (2014).

<sup>62</sup> Tanabe (1993-94); Tanabe (2005). See also, among the abundant bibliography, Flood (1989); Mustamandy (1998); Derrett (2002: 350); I-Tien, Crowell (2005). On specific Heracles' deeds, see Taddei (1965); Harle (1985). On the reasons why Heracles was chosen see Santoro (1991).

<sup>63</sup> Foucher (1950); Khan (1990).

<sup>64</sup> Taddei (1963).

In the early Severan Age, Clement of Alexandria wrote a few sentences about the Indian followers of Buddhist religion.<sup>65</sup> The version  $\beta$  of the Romance of Alexander tells the story of the Macedonian king reaching an Indian city called Lysos, where a round temple was worth visiting with its stone reliefs depicting Dionysiac scenes. The description was possibly influenced by real Indian Kushan art and round Stupas.<sup>66</sup> In this temple two bowls were kept containing 60 *metretes* of liquid, i.e. more than 2000 litres.

A particularly interesting testimony is a fragment of Porphyry,<sup>67</sup> from his treatise on Styx' water, where we read:

The Indians<sup>68</sup> who lived in Syria under the reign of the Emesene Antonine (i.e. Heliogabalus) had a discussion with the Mesopotamian Bardisanes, and related, as Bardisanes wrote, the following things...

Porphyry reports the discussion between Bardesanes and a group of Indian sages by borrowing from a work of this famous Christian astrologist from Emesa. The Indians described to him a statue depicting the hermaphrodite Shiva Ardhanarisvara, and the description dovetails some magical gems cut somewhere in eastern parts of the Roman Empire.<sup>69</sup> The teaching of these Indian wise men evidently triggered discussions and speculations among the Romans in different provinces.

### *6. The cup of Septimius Severus*

The legend of the magical cup was already known under Septimius Severus because only this legend could account for an apparently meaningless episode reported by Cassius Dio. This Roman historian, who wrote his work during the last decades of the Severan Age, describes the second Parthian campaign of Septimius Severus and reports an episode occurred in 197, when the invasion of the Parthian empire begun:

After crossing the Euphrates and invading the enemy's territory, where the country is always destitute of water and at that time by reason of the heat had

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<sup>65</sup> Clem., *Strom.* 1.15.71. See Muckensturm-Pouille (2003); Ducœur (2010).

<sup>66</sup> *Historia Alexandri*, rec.  $\beta$ , III.28.5-10; see Garstad (2018: 55).

<sup>67</sup> Fr. 7 Smith = fr. 7 Castelletti (2006) = Stob. I.3.56 (I, 66-70 Wachsm.).

<sup>68</sup> From other passages it becomes clear that they were Brahmans.

<sup>69</sup> See Mastrocinque (2011: chap. 3).

become especially parched, he came very near losing a vast number of soldiers. For when they were already wearied by their march and by the hot sun, they encountered a dust-storm that caused them great distress, so that they could no longer march or even talk, but only cry, "Water! Water!" And when water did appear, on account of its strangeness it meant no more to them than if it had not been found at all, — until Severus called for a cup, and filling it with the water, drained it in full view of all; then, indeed, some others likewise drank and were refreshed.<sup>70</sup>

This account, per se, is inconsistent: in the desert the Roman army, suffering from thirst, finally found some water, but the water was strange, unfit, or even it was a mirage (the meaning of ἀτοπία is not univocal), but only when Severus drank it from his cup, the soldiers could quench their thirst. This was an alleged miracle, probably inspired by the desire of emulating Marcus Aurelius, whose army was suffering from thirst in Pannonia but a miraculous rain rescued it. The episode of Alexander in the Gedrosian desert<sup>71</sup> could also have given an impulse to reshape the deeds of Severus, in order to show that this latter was similar or even better than Alexander, who refused to drink the few water which his soldiers were able to find in order not to be the only one who drank among his thirsty army. In the case of Severus the cup was the implement to rescue the army, but Cassius Dio did not want to admit such a miracle and his account turned out to be absurd. The fame of the legendary cup of Tantalus and also of the bowl of Buddha could account for this strange story. The cup of Severus provided the soldiers with an enormous amount of water even if the liquid was scarce, or of bad quality, or was only a mirage.

### 7. *A Bowl of Tantalus from Pannonia*

Now we will speak of a real 4th century AD cup of Tantalus (figs. 3-4) recently discovered at Vinkovci, Croatia, the ancient Cibalae, in Pannonia secunda. It was included in a treasury of 48 objects, mostly on silver plate, typical of sumptuous banquets.<sup>72</sup> According to the editors,

<sup>70</sup> Cass. Dio LXXV.2; transl. Cary and Foster. The final phrase is: ἐπεὶ δὲ ἀνεφάνη μὲν [ικμάς], ἐξ ἴσου δὲ τῷ μὴ εὐρεθέντι ἀρχὴν ὑπὸ ἀτοπίας ἦν, ὁ Σεουήρος κύλικά τε ἤτησε καὶ τοῦ ὕδατος πληρώσας ἀπάντων ὀρόντων ἐξέπιε. καὶ τότε μὲν οὕτω καὶ ἄλλοι τινὲς προσπιόντες ἀνερρώσθησαν.

<sup>71</sup> Arr., *Anab.* VI.26.2-3.

<sup>72</sup> Vulić, Doračić, Hobbs, Lang (2017).





Fig. 3. The cup of Tantalus. Archaeological Museum in Zagreb, photograph by Damir Doračić.

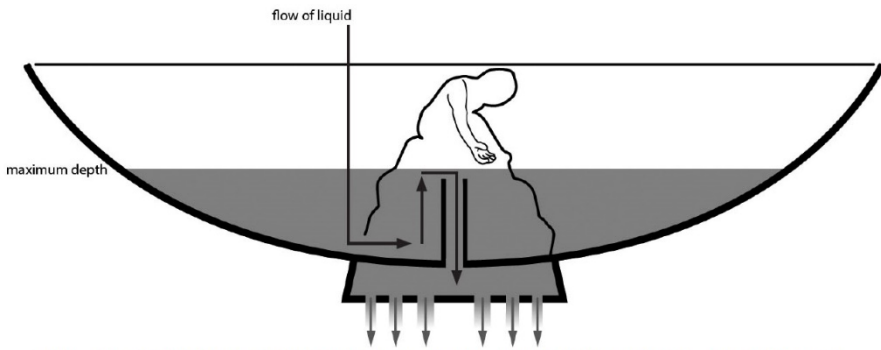


Fig. 6. How the Tantalus bowl functioned when in use (cat. no. 9) (*del.* Craig Williams, British Museum).

Fig. 4. The cup of Tantalus. Drawing from Vulić, Doračić, Hobbs, Lang (2017).

“The most remarkable vessel, without close parallel, is a silver-gilt hemispherical bowl with openwork flared foot-ring...on the inside has a figurative frieze depicting a marine thiasos... Running around the lower edge of the marine thiasos is the following inscription: AVARI DESCRIBVNTUR QVOS CIRCVMFLVIT. VSVS BONORVM SED NIHIL POSSUNT TANGERE. The quotation derives from Fable 7 of the Appendix Perottina of Phaedrus, entitled “The significance of the punishments of Tartarus”. With the inclusion of the missing text that provides the necessary context, it can be translated as: (When Tantalus is athirst, standing in the midst of the river), the greedy are described, as those whom an availability of good things flows around, but they are unable to touch any of them [translation suggested by R. S. O. Tomlin, pers. comm.]

The text makes it possible to make sense of the other unique feature of the bowl, a sheet metal sculpture of a naked figure seated on a rock and leaning down with outstretched hand who can only represent Tantalus himself, stretching out a hand to drink from the liquid placed in the bowl. Remarkably, the bowl — presumably for the amusement of guests — could never be filled with liquid to the brim, since it would always ‘magically’ disappear. This was achieved via 4 holes in the base of Tantalus’ rock: liquid (presumably wine or water) poured into the bowl would pass through these holes and rise to the level of the top of a silver tube hidden within the base. If the bowl continued to be filled, the liquid would flow into the top of the tube and out through the centre of the base (the circular perforation is clearly visible on the bowl’s radiograph), presumably into a receptacle below, or, if the host wished to be mischievous, all over an unsuspecting guest if they happened to be holding it at the time...

We are also given the name of the maker of this party-piece. On a perforated base plate, which sat on top of the openwork foot-ring of the bowl, is an engraved inscription: ANTONINVS.FECIT.AQUIL. [hedera]. This can only be interpreted as “Antoninus made (me) at Aquil(eia)”.

Now we read again Philostratus’ words where he describes the four stone bowls: τῶν δὲ τριπόδων οἱ μὲν δύο οἴνου ἐπέρρεον, τοῖν δυοῖν δὲ ὁ μὲν ὕδατος θερμοῦ κρήνην παρεῖχεν, ὁ δὲ αὖ ψυχροῦ. The verb ἐπέρρεον is aimed at presenting a flowing liquid as from a spring. The same idea is expressed by the words τὸ γὰρ νᾶμα ἀφρόνως ἐπεδίδου, καθάπερ δὴ τοῖς πηγαίοις ἀναδιδόμενοις, concerning the bowl for the final drink. The cup pertaining to the statue of Tantalus was similarly described: ἐν ἧ στάλαγμα ἐκάχλαζεν ἀκηράτου πώματος οὐχ ὑπερβλύζον τῆς φιάλης. Philostratus felt that it was the case of saying that the liquid did not reach the

rim of the cup and he was probably thinking of a cup similar to that from Vinkovci, whose contents could never reach the rim.

An allusion to a thirsty man also recurs on a cup from Malaga bearing this inscription: ACCIPE ME SITIENS FORTE PLACEBO TIBI (take me, if you are thirsty, you will like me).<sup>73</sup>

This late antique tradition considered Tantalus to be a greedy and avaricious man who was consequently condemned never to enjoy his wealth. In the *Life of Costantine* by Eusebius<sup>74</sup> Tantalus is a symbol of endless greed for money, in the vein of Phaedrus' tale:

So that when he (the emperor Licinius) had filled all his treasuries with gold, and silver, and boundless wealth, he bitterly bewailed his poverty, and suffered as it were the torments of Tantalus.

In the 2nd century AD some images still depicted Tantalus in Hades, according to the old Homeric tradition.<sup>75</sup> At the beginning of the 3rd century – if not before – he underwent a complete transformation and became a generous, philanthropic, and even divine man. However, the previous evaluation was not forgotten and he was either the patron of everlasting abundance or the thirstiest of men. His cup was either half empty or half full.

The inscription on the Vinkovci cup refers to a liquid reaching a certain level, and no more, always below Tantalus and out of his reach, and the hidden holes made the overflowing liquid drop off. However, such a cup could also be filled simply by laying it on the surface of liquid in a large vessel and, if softly lowered, the liquid sprang “miraculously” from the bottom (fig. 5). By using a leather wine bag hidden at the center of the table it was even possible to conceal the gimmick if the mouth of the bag was inserted into the cup's bottom and the bag softly pressed.

#### *Addendum. Tantalus' Magic*

The tripods carrying the stone bowls were supposed to move automatically and Philostratus alludes to the gold three-wheeled tripods made by Hephaestus for the dining room of the Olympian gods, which were able to move and go automatically

<sup>73</sup> Fernández Martínez, Carande Herrero (2004).

<sup>74</sup> Euseb., *Hist. Eccl.* 1.55.2. Cf. Petron., *Satyr.* 82; Lucian., *Tim.* 18.

<sup>75</sup> 2nd cent AD fresco from Tyre: Dunand (1965); Pectenò (2004: 126).



Fig. 5. The cup of Tantalus drawing wine from a large bowl. Images processed by Mastrocinque.

to their place.<sup>76</sup> What was normal among the gods, if it occurred among the humans, was and is labeled “magic”.<sup>77</sup> The cup of Tantalus was indeed used in “magical” practices and magical amulets.

A small series of hematite magical gems<sup>78</sup> employs the myth of Tantalus to stop hemorrhages or to make the blood flow. The obverse shows Ares standing and armed beneath the diminishing edge of a wing-shaped spell reading  $\delta\iota\upsilon\acute{\alpha}\varsigma$   $\tau\acute{\alpha}\nu\tau\alpha\lambda\epsilon$   $\alpha\acute{\iota}\mu\alpha$   $\pi\acute{\iota}\epsilon$ , i.e. “If you are thirsty, Tantalus, drink blood!”. The triangular shape of the spell, similar to that of a wing, is produced by repeating the same command in every line but leaving off the first letter. This process is repeated line-by-line until all the letters are gone. On the reverse side there is an upright vase set upon a small horned base and surrounded by a series of magical words

<sup>76</sup> Hom., *Il.* 18.375-377.

<sup>77</sup> This trivial word is typical of European culture and corresponds to a questionable and imprecise concept, referred to as a miracle which does not depend on the Christian god. The word is spontaneously used by many people pertaining to this culture who are not obsessed by the use of correct, univocal, and meaningful words.

<sup>78</sup> Michel (2001: no 410); Michel (2004: 294); Mastrocinque (2014: nos. 353-354). An updated list of this kind of gems is provided by Zellmann-Rohrer (2020).



Fig. 6. Hematite gem with the spell of Tantalus. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Département des monnaies médailles et antiques. From Mastrocinque (2014: no. 353).

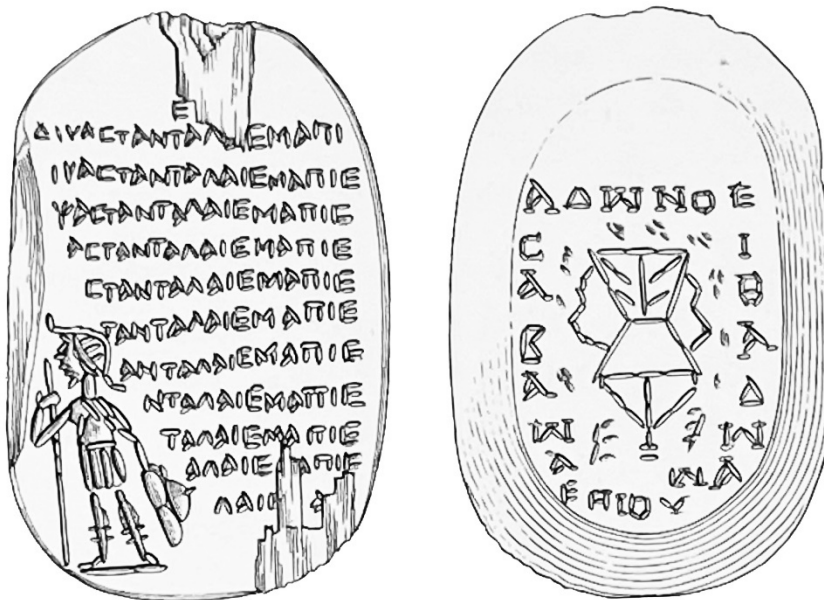


Fig. 7. Hematite gem with the spell of Tantalus. British Museum. From Michel (2001: no. 383).

consisting of Jewish divine names and the vowels. Two snakes are going to the rim of the vase in order to enter it. The vase is usually interpreted as a woman's womb and thus the words in wing-formation are supposed to stop menorrhoea. Alphonse Barb<sup>79</sup> realized that the logic implied in the spell was that the water lowered when Tantalus tried to drink and similarly the hemorrhagic blood should sink. Campbell Bonner<sup>80</sup> noticed that *δυσάς* also means "viper", an animal supposed to be thirsty.<sup>81</sup> One kind of viper was the so-called *aimorrhous* whose bite was supposed to cause hemorrhages.<sup>82</sup> Lucianus of Samosata<sup>83</sup> says that a person became extremely thirsty while trying to cross the Libyan desert. He was bitten by a viper and died; Tantalus and the Danaids were depicted on his tomb, because they were always looking for water and could never get it. An anonymous Greek poet<sup>84</sup> wrote that Tantalus was always thirsty because of a snake's bite. Therefore Tantalus and the vipers shared the same thirst.

Christopher A. Faraone<sup>85</sup> added another tile to this puzzle: some magical/medical late antique recipes which resorted to Tantalus in cases of bleeding. In the Additions to Theodorus Priscianus<sup>86</sup> we read:

*in tria folia lauri scribis de sanguine ipsius (scil. qui patitur) . Tantale pie, pie Tantale, Tantale pie ., et de suco porri virginis lavas folia ipsa, et das ei bibere.*

You write on three laurel leaves with (the patient's) blood, "Tantalus, drink, drink Tantalus, Tantalus, drink !" and wash the leaves with the juice of wild leek and give it to him (i.e. the patient) to drink.

In a manuscript of the Bibliothek der Rijksuniversiteit in Leiden<sup>87</sup> we read:

<sup>79</sup> Barb (1952).

<sup>80</sup> Bonner (1950: 88-89, no. 144).

<sup>81</sup> Nicandrus, *Theriaca*, 334.

<sup>82</sup> Philumenus, *De venenatis animalibus eorumque remediis* (ed. Wellmann; *Corpus medicorum Graecorum*, X) 20.2; cf. Mastrocinque (2014: 132).

<sup>83</sup> *Dipsades*, 6.

<sup>84</sup> *Anthologiae Graecae Appendix*, 121; Aretaeus, *De causis et signis acutorum morborum*, ed. Hude (1958), 2.2.5; cf. Manetho, *Apotelesmatica*, ed. Koechly (1862), 5.187.

<sup>85</sup> Faraone (2009).

<sup>86</sup> Pseudo-Theodorus, p. 276 Rose.

<sup>87</sup> Ed. Heim (1893: 502, no. 122); see Fahney (1913: 42-43); Önnersfors (1993: 207).

*ad profluuium sanguinis. scribis in cartha et legas de tela, si uir est, in collo, si mulier, invilico, sic ut terra non tangat, ita sanguen viventale, Tantale vives sanguine Tantale.*

Richard Heim corrected *invilico* with *in umbilico*, and a new reading and edition, based on a control of the manuscript, is the following one by M. Zellmann-Rohrer:<sup>88</sup>

*ad profluuium sanguinis. scribis in cartha et legas de tela, si uir est, in collo, si mulier, in (um)bilico, sic ut terra(m) non tangat, ita: 'sangu(in)em bibe (Ta)ntale, Tantale bibe sanguine(m), bibe sanguine(m) Tantale.'*

I translate this text in this way:

Against an efflux of blood. You write on papyrus and bind with thread, if (the patient) is a man, on the neck, and if a woman, on the navel. So that it does not touch the ground, in the same manner: “Drink blood, Tantalus, Tantalus, drink blood, drink blood, Tantalus.”

M. Zellmann-Rohrer reports other spells of this kind. A text in the Glasgow University Library reads:

*ad perfluvium mulieris... scribes in carta literas istas et super pectinem ipsius ligabis:*

*TANTAΛOCOMEINEI TANTANOCOSMEINEI TABtanOCOYEINEI*

Zellmann-Rohrer recognized in the last words the well-known Tantalus spell, and his translation is:

Against an efflux of blood in a woman... You will write these letters on papyrus and bind (it) on her pubic region, “(Tantalus drink blood, Tantalus drink blood, Tantalus drink blood)”.

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<sup>88</sup> Zellmann-Rohrer (2020: 329). The correction *sangu(in)em* is unnecessary because *sanguen* is the premise of Italian “sangue”, French “sang”, Spanish “sangre”.

Another spell prescribes how to write the spell on the forehead of the patient and a Greek recipe of the same kind is referred to the *epistaxis*, and the beginning of the spell should be written on the forehead.<sup>89</sup>

These late antique spells are interesting because they clarify the purposes of this practice: stop bleeding from different parts of the human body, especially the womb and the nose, and also because they give information about the use of these amulets: *sic ut terra non tangat, ita sanguen viventale...* This spell uses a comparison: *sic ut... ita*, where the touching of the ground is the first element, and the drinking Tantalus the second.

Therefore we agree with the translation by Faraone:<sup>90</sup> “Just as [sc. the amulet] does not touch the earth, so drink blood, Tantalus!”. In addition, this author writes: “hematite had other properties that connected it analogically with blood – especially the fact that some types, when wet and rubbed, produce a blood-colored liquid. In this case, since the stone seems to bleed itself, it seems entirely plausible that it could also be used in rites that aimed to encourage bleeding. We know, in fact, on at least one magical spell designed to promote uterine bleeding: a fragmentary amulet-recipe from a Roman-era magical handbook (*PGM* LXII 76–106). The rubric and introduction have not survived, but the request to be inscribed on the amulet makes its purpose abundantly clear: “Let the genitals and the womb of her, So-and-so, be open and let her become bloody by night and day.””

A drawing accompanies this recipe and shows a moon-shaped object similar to the curved object beneath the vase.

Christopher Faraone supposes that these gems could be used for either stopping hemorrhages or producing them. The soldier on the obverse side is not an ordinary man, because on magical gems only meaningful characters were depicted. As in a temple, also on amulets a soldier could not be a Titius or a Caius,<sup>91</sup> but an eminent figure with religious meaning, usually a god. An easy comparison with other magical hematite gems shows that Ares is recurring. Ares was a god who did not stop the bleeding but, on the contrary, produced wounds and bleeding.<sup>92</sup>

<sup>89</sup> Zellmann-Rohrer (2020: 330).

<sup>90</sup> Faraone (2009: 21). Zellmann-Rohrer (2020: 329), instead, proposes: “bind ... on the navel, such that it not touch the ground, as follows, “Drink blood, Tantalus ...”.

<sup>91</sup> Preininger Svobodov (2019, 136) singled out some soldiers called Tantalus in Greek and Roman history but refused to identify any of them with the warrior on the gems and prefers to identify him as Ares.

<sup>92</sup> Mastrocinque (2014: 132, cites a bronze greave, depicting a vase with two snakes going to drink is depicted as a comparison for the iconography of the Tantalus gems.



Two specimens<sup>93</sup> also show, on the obverse side, beneath the wing-formation, a demon, having the head of an animal and his hands bound behind his back. This demon alludes to the Homeric scene of Tantalus in the *Odyssey* (XI.582-587), where Tantalus is in the world of the dead and is described in the following way:

“as often as the old man stooped down, eager to drink, so often would the water be  
swallowed up and vanish away, and at his feet the black earth would appear,  
for some daimôn would dry it all up”.

The tied hands of the demon convey a simple message: the demon cannot enact his task, and therefore Tantalus can drink.

The mysterious object on the reverse side could be the womb with its mouth upwards. If this is true, we recall that such an iconography, recurring on magical gems, symbolizes that the womb was open, and therefore abortion or sex were possible, and, in this case, Seth is often depicted on this organ. On the contrary, the womb with its mouth downwards symbolizes the closing of the organ, and thus pregnancy was favored, under the protection of Osiris, Isis, Harpocrates, Anubis, and Chnoubis, who are often depicted on the womb. A key also symbolizes the act of closing it and is depicted near the mouth of the womb. One special spell accompanied the open womb and another the closed one.<sup>94</sup>

If the object is truly a womb, its representation is unique, and different from other known typologies recurring on magical gems.<sup>95</sup> In any case, we have no better hypothesis to explain this object. It is divided into four zones by three curved lines. Two gems in the British Museum depict, instead of this peculiar womb, a sort of vessel which is completely visible only in one gem and partially in the other, whose iconography is uncertain. This object has no base and is divided into three parts: two trapezes and a triangle one on another. In this case, the snakes are similar to two handles.

The object depicted below this womb-vase is also mysterious and has been described as a horned altar, a cup, or a base. It does not touch the womb and is absent in the specimen with the geometrical vase.

The four zones could refer to the four Buddhist stone bowls piled one on another, but this is a hazardous hypothesis, and the same could be said of the cup-

<sup>93</sup> British Museum: Michel (2001, no. 382); Paul Getty Museum: Zellmann-Rohrer (2020).

<sup>94</sup> On the position of the womb: Faraone (2009: 25-26). On the different role of Seth and Osiris (and his “family”): Griffiths, Barb (1959); Aubert (1989); on the spell for opening: Ritner (1984).

<sup>95</sup> On the iconography of the womb on magical gems: Dasen (2002); Dasen (2005); Dasen (2007); see recently Preininger Svobodov (2019: 141-143).

altar depicted below, which could be interpreted as the cup of Tantalus. As we know of many recipes concerning hemorrhages from the womb and referring to Tantalus, it is probable that a peculiar womb is represented on these gems, but nothing more can be said, in my opinion.

On the other hand, we can better explain the prescription concerning the amulet touching the ground thanks to both the legendary and the real cups of Tantalus. The amulet of Tantalus stopped the hemorrhage if it did not touch the ground, and did not stop it and even produced hemorrhages by touching it. Now we think of the real cup of Tantalus and realize that it let the liquid drop if raised from the ground, but was filled with liquid if it touched the content of a larger bowl, where the liquid appeared gushing out of the bottom of the cup. This explains why the amulet produced liquid by touching the ground and lowered the liquid by raising it.

### *Conclusions*

The Homeric myth of Tantalus triggered many speculations and different interpretations. Pindar disagreed with the drastic condemnation of the old sinner and myths were created about his eternal thirst and hunger. In the 2nd century AD myths told of his death in a desert from a viper bite. His crime of killing his son Pelops was apparently forgotten and he was supposed to live among the gods. A complete transformation was made by Greeks in the Greek communities in India, where he became the friend of humankind to whom he provided ambrosia, the drink of the gods. In the same vein as that of the dialogue reported by Philostratus the Indo-Greeks rethought the Greek mythology and singled out myths which presented similarities with Indian traditions. In the 3rd century different religions were put in comparison and learned sages dug in the past and looked for the truth. An excellent means to recognize the truth was that of singling out correspondences between ancient Greek traditions and Indian, Egyptian, Jewish traditions. The art of Gandhara testifies to such a rethinking among the Indo-Greeks who knew Indian religions and myths, and especially Buddhism. Tantalus stood in a pond whose water grew up or sank miraculously; he provided the humans with divine ambrosia, sat under a tree, and fasted. These features of the myth gave the opportunity for recognizing the miracle of food and drink produced miraculously by the bowl of Buddha, the *philanthropia* of Buddha, his fasting, the tree which sheltered him. A hidden truth was discovered in Homer thanks to Indian Buddhism. In the Severan Age, Philostratus was a witness of this new way of thinking

and rethinking, in an age when Greco-Roman culture was losing its centrality and Syrian, Phoenician, and Punic traditions were obtaining a greater worthiness.

The magical cup of Tantalus was a result of this rethinking and the Buddhist legend of the bowl whose content never overflowed was exploited for giving a moral value to this cup. Faxian reported the following belief: “if a poor man put a flower into the bowl it filled with flowers by himself, but a rich man was unable to fill it with coins even if he put a number of them inside”: an avaricious man could never see the bowl filled with wealth. In the Roman Empire Tantalus and his cup also became a symbol of avarice because this hero was supposed to have at his disposal a great wealth but he could not use it and was always greedy. An avaricious man could never see the bowl filled with wealth. This mythical cup was eventually made of metal in order to imitate the legend and use a cup which could never fill or overflow, and possibly did not stop producing drink automatically. This feature of Tantalus did not recur in ancient Greek myths and possibly depended on influences from Indian legends similar to those in the report of Faxian. Tantalus’ legendary thirst and hunger were used in some magical performances either to stop the bleeding or to resume menstruation or hemorrhages. In this case, instead of a cup, a magical gem and/or a spell were used to either increase or decrease the level of a liquid substance.

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